Blended Learning: Education Innovation & Productivity

- 02/14/06

By Karen Vignare
Director, MSU Global Ventures
Michigan State University

Blended learning is the "new" buzz in higher education. Many educational researchers have discovered that online learning environments are particularly useful for communications and collaboration. When you add in management and administrative tools available in most course management systems today online learning environments are fairly robust. But giving up the classroom seems a little drastic and premature. The result is using both environments—online and face-to-face—in a planned and pedagogically opportunistic way. Yet, the research on and about blended learning is less convincing than online asynchronous education. Still, many of us almost instinctively think blended learning will be good for higher education. Why? Let's start with some basics.

Students like moderate amounts of technology. They use educational technologies, mainly course management systems for convenience, connection, and control. It is convenient to have your course documents all in one place. Students find having technology convenient—they can get to the course(s) anytime they want, they can get back up documents. Students also want the convenience of having assessments online for practice, lecture notes and discussions. What about connectivity? Does anyone really need another way to contact people? Beyond your professor you are unlikely to know how to connect to many people in your class and being able to connect, collaborate and share are really valuable learning functions. Next on the list is the issue of control and what control means is students want to decide when and where to do their class work.

Students are starting to get what they want but are we really giving them anything new—probably not, but that could change. Blended learning is a result of huge technology investments on campuses, the Internet, and asynchronous online distance learning. Many of these developments have happened rapidly for higher education. Twenty percent of all higher education students now take online courses and that is a dramatic increase from under 1 percent in 1995 to 20 percent today. The Internet itself and most of the new technology has also been added to the higher education environment within the past 10 years. The shift in student demand and the new Internet communications technology has created real opportunity to innovate teaching. For the most part though the innovations are occurring online, and lecture remains the dominant teaching tool in the classroom. How will blended courses using online learning instructional strategies change teaching?

First and foremost teaching becomes visible. For centuries teaching has been protected through academic freedom. While online is usually password protected, faculty themselves have opened up their classes and instructional strategies to other faculty. Faculty are documenting, writing and sharing information about what they are doing. Faculty have documented how constructivism and collaboration can work using many online innovative techniques. And that is the key
word-innovation. Innovation is spurred by the right organizational set up, like having the right technologies, offering training and competition. The competition was spurred by online learning.

The question is: can blended learning continue the trend commenced by online learning? The answer is a guarded yes but certain conditions will need to be fostered. Pedagogical support and training for the nearly 80 percent of faculty who have not been teaching online needs to be initiated. Almost no other industry has invested as much into information technology and so little into training. This needs to change-faculty need support and new ideas. In addition, while academic support is critical, faculty exchange of ideas through internally supported and internally rewarded time is also critical. Until other faculty know what other faculty are doing, they will not learn of good instructional approaches and they will not be forced to try new techniques because they just don't know they exist. Faculty still mainly work independently and unless that is changed, instruction can not be changed.

Reviewing current blended learning course activities as written by faculty researchers indicates they chose online learning because they felt it will improve student communication, offer new pedagogical approaches for learning content, offer students with different learning styles more approaches to meet their needs, be more flexible for students, offer students more practice through online assessments, requires more active student participation than a lecture and provide a better "real" world experience for students. None of these strategies or thoughts is particularly groundbreaking but they are recognized as learner centered and good instructional practices. And the only tool needed for all these instructional strategies to be implemented is an asynchronous discussion board.

The learning innovations are allowing higher education to get better at teaching and thus more productive. It remains to be seen whether blended learning is better but clearly it is spurring innovation that is sustainable. Bringing online learning into the classroom through blended learning gives higher education a very easy way to adapt, innovate and become more productive. Stay tuned!